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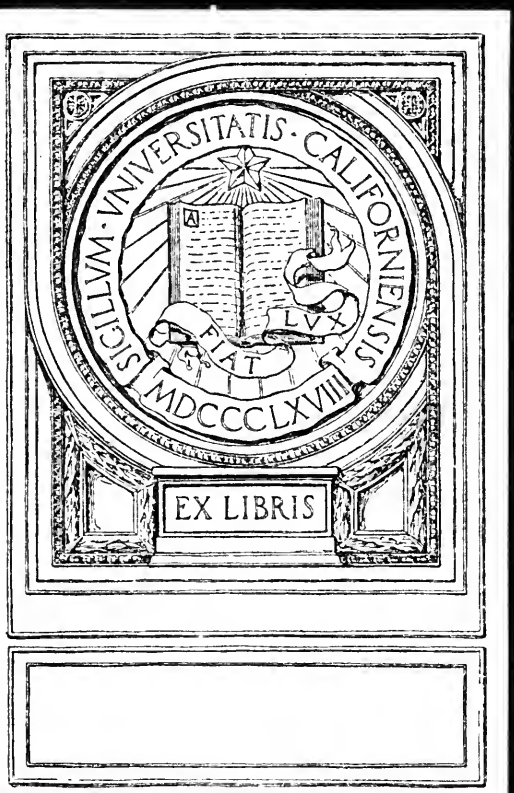

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EUGENICS, ETHICS AND RELIGION

BY THE

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EUGENICS, ETHICS AND RELIGION

By

E. LYTTELTON

EUGENICS is a movement eagerly being forwarded by some people, misunderstood or ignored by a very large number, and actively distrusted by a few. I doubt if any good movement for the betterment of the human race has ever been without these three concomitants: encouragement, indifference, distrust; and the greatest movements have enjoyed or endured all three in the largest degree. The object of those who favour the movement is by persuasion and explanation to transfer some of those who form class 2 to class 1: and some from class 3 either to class 1 or 2; that is, to change them from being outspoken adversaries into supporters, even though they may have to pass on the way into the large, grey crowd of Englishmen whose demeanour towards eugenics will then take the form of shrugging the shoulder, and, perhaps, of holding the tongue. Some, however, we may hope, will skip actively over class 2 and swell the ranks of class 1.

Now class 3, if I am not mistaken, is composed largely of people who are genuinely alarmed at eugenics, and believe that it is characterised by an irreverent disposition to talk openly and crudely of things hitherto treated as sacred, and to advocate rather mechanical remedies for troubles mainly spiritual. Many of these critics are religious people. On the other hand, the eugenists are inclined to despair of the religious folk as being inclined not to leave well alone but ill alone: that is, they charge them with acquiescing in a very serious and appalling state of things brought about largely by reticence and mistimed prudery, and refusing

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to see that the one course to pursue when reticence has failed is to speak; and they are further inclined to hold that this mistaken view is encouraged by religion itself.

Such, roughly speaking, seem to be the feelings of two groups. We ought to be desirous of helping to a better mutual understanding, and I will attempt to indicate lines of thought which may forward this object by noticing first what the foundation principle of eugenics is. One of Bishop Westcott's pregnant sayings was that all controversy concerns details. If so, the deeper we go the better chance there is of reaching the point where controversy dies away.

Eugenics, then, is concerned with racial development, and deals with the past in a scientific way; that is, as hoping to extract from it lessons for the future. It occupies itself with generations yet unborn. Now, if that were all, it might be called a form of patriotism; and if we could go no further than that statement, we should have reached a point fairly free from controversy. But we can go further. If I had said that the generations yet unborn meant exclusively the English stock, or even British stock, I think the definition would have been demurred to on the ground of narrowness. In other words, we have become cosmopolitan in our aims of bettering human life: but let us see what that means. Instead of our ground principle being simply patriotism, we must restate it as follows: Eugenics is a movement for emphasising certain aspects of the preciousness of human life. It has definite practical aims connected with, but not at all limited by, problems of sex. The reason why it has so far dealt mainly with those problems is that they seem to have been either neglected or misunderstood. But the important fact is that the ground principle of eugenics is a deepened sense of the value of human life. But this sense is a direct outcome of Christianity. No one has ever contributed to the deepening of that sense in any way comparable to that which was the work of Christ. I doubt if this will be disputed: but we must notice that Christianity teaches the infinite value of human life, not because healthy men make good soldiers, but because men are spiritual beings and have immortal souls. Whatever a eugenist might verbally deny, I hold that he virtually accepts that doctrine, else he would not be concerned with future generations of men not British; whereas at present he is quite ready to join an international conference and tell foreigners what he has learnt at home. This is a really striking fact in human history.

Does, then, eugenics do, or try to do, anything more than sensible Christians are trying to do? Perhaps not more than sensible Christians : but then, some Christians are not sensible, and even if they were, they would be none the worse for using some better long-distance glasses than they have used hitherto. The eugenist recognises that a sound idea of the preciousness of human life must operate in the biological sphere—a region where many good Christians are not quite at home. He is an interpreter of the spiritual or abstract in terms of the concrete : often without knowing exactly what he is about : forgetting, or never having grasped, what his spiritual starting-point is. Or he may have refused to recognise it because he has heard it advocated by men whom he cannot whole-heartedly respect. It may be that some cleric of the condescending school, stiff-collared and stiff-necked, has tried to commend the principles to him in words which he does not understand himself, and which he contradicts daily in his own life. Such things have happened, and have not helped to bridge the gulf, but to widen it. Moreover, the eugenist ought to be welcomed by the religious trainer of the young, since he can show him how vigorously Science corroborates the true principles of child-training. But I think a Christian educator can hardly be expected to give this welcome to biology unless it comes as an *addendum* to something deeper and more personal. This point requires some amplification.

By the word Christian I mean a man who really believes that at a certain period the Deity gave to mankind a revelation of truth and a power to live in it which they could not otherwise have gained. For such a man really holding that belief, it is inconceivable that there can be any higher aim in education than the implanting in a vital fashion, as a living and growing thing, that Truth which he has himself received : especially as he knows it was given in order that it should be passed on, and because he feels that there is in it a self-propagating power if the early planting is done according to nature. In other words, truths about man's relation to God must obviously take precedence of all truths which only deal with man's relation to his fellow-men or his care of his own body. That is to say, they take precedence not only because they were specially revealed, but because they underlie the others and make it possible for them to be learnt and practised. Of course, there are some who hold that this dependence of morality upon religion is absurdly overstated. But I am not anxious to dispute the matter now ; my object is to show

clearly what is the deepest of all the presuppositions in a Christian's mind in order that everyone may understand how he must approach all questions of moral education. Unless he is a sham he must be unshakably convinced that true thoughts about God, planted deeply enough in a child's mind and interpreted by every moral problem that arises as time goes on, and by every lapse from the ideal of which the child may be guilty, do really settle the whole question of character-training; with a few common-sense precautions, there remains very little else that requires to be done. If anyone thinks such a view irrational or unintelligible he is welcome to. I don't ask him to accept it, but to show consideration for it, because it is utterly impossible otherwise to work with him, and the eugenist and the Christian are really so near together that there should be no difficulty about co-operation between them. The first truth for the scientific eugenist is the second truth in the Christian series; it is the unspeakable value of human life; the eugenist starts with it, the Christian treats it as a corollary of something deeper and more mystic which the eugenist may or may not understand. Is there anything in this difference as to fundamentals which ought to prevent unity, even cordial unity of action and common purpose? I see nothing that *need* prevent unity, but there are many things that *do*, and one of them undoubtedly is a certain inability on the part of religious people to recognise the plain, practical outcome of their religious principles in ordinary life. If human life is so precious, as they are bound to believe it is, how is it they acquiesce so readily in its wreckage, and look askance at others who are labouring to pilot the vessels into harbour without dashing them on to hidden reefs?

That is one hindrance; here is another on the other side. If a eugenist has never made clear to himself why he estimates human life so highly, and yet makes his estimate a foundation of all his aims and endeavours, he is in some danger of forgetting that to a Christian all subjects connected with sex must be approached with reverence as sacred ground: not only because there are in his mind certain deep convictions about every man being endowed by his Creator with something of creative power shown in fatherhood, but also because if he has any experience of young boys he knows that if the sense of reverence in them is violated immeasurable harm is done, and that there is no subject in which a young boy demands reverence more urgently than in matters of sex. Now, when these are the man's convic-

tions, imagine what must be his feeling when he hears some advocates of eugenist principles insisting on what is called a progressive programme in the dim twilight of the most personal, most mysterious region of our wonderful human nature; or when he reads some of the coarse, naked utterances which have been penned—mostly on the other side of the Atlantic—showing an incredible disregard for all that is meant by tenderness and delicacy of feeling, as well as for great and ancient traditions interwoven with all that is best and most stable and most living among earth's foremost peoples; if this, I say, has been his experience, he could only express himself in the words used once by a cricketer who was voyaging in a steamship with ten others to Australia several years ago. His companion in the cabin had ordered a bath, and in the morning the steward brought it in and poured out the cold water. Our friend, who was not a eugenist, but for cleanness trusted entirely to unassisted skin action, hearing the noise, protruded his head from his berth and asked 'Whatever is that?' and on being told it was a bath, said 'Ugh! take it away; it makes me shudder.'

Hence there have been barriers built on both sides by those who have had what may be called unfortunate experiences. But I wish to notice a misgiving felt by many eugenists about the effect, not of folly or extravagance in the professors of religion, but about its own inevitable influence. It should be noted that I am trying to explain the attitude of thorough-going representatives of both groups. Well, is it not the fact that the more thorough-going a Christian is in his loyalty to the teaching of his Master, the more unworldly he must be, and if he is unworldly, how can he be patriotic? How can he concern himself in any vigorous or persevering fashion with difficult mundane problems? Have not his efforts in the past been always devoted solely to spreading the knowledge of what he believes to be the truth, and leaving it to work its own effect on outward conditions? Doubtless there have been many even of the ministers of religion who have done good work in social matters, but are they not decried by their more spiritually-minded brethren, and, if so, is there any hope of eugenists securing these latter as allies?

These questions go deep into a quagmire of controversy which discusses the complex riddle of the relation between principles and practice, between mediation and action, faith and works, labour and prayer, and so forth. I cannot go far into the obscurity, but perhaps it will tend to allay some anxieties if I

mention the change which has come about in the ideas of religious people as to the claims of this world and the next. Historically there would be much of interest to say in regard to the tone of feeling down to quite recent times; but I will only refer to one incident often mentioned by Mr. Gladstone. By a rare chance the well-known statesman Lord Melbourne once heard a plain, modern sort of sermon dealing with present-day problems in a practical fashion. His lordship on the conclusion of the service was heard, as he was pulling on his gloves in the porch, denouncing the sermon as follows (with suitable modifications): 'Hang it all! did ye ever hear such a thing? I believe in religion and all that, and want to hear a man preach about such things, but when you are talked to about matters of ordinary life—bless me! what next?' Such a comment would never be heard nowadays. Christians—Englishmen at any rate—have lately come to see that the Founder of their Faith not only planted new ideas in men's minds about their relation to God, and immensely strengthened the vitality of old ones, but He also extended His beneficent activity to so mundane a matter as bodily health; how, then, can anyone say that Christianity has no concern with the environment of our fellow-men? or their bodily health or the health of the next generation, in so far as it depends on the forethought of this? Of course, as soon as this aspect of the matter is discovered, a danger arises of men whose activities ought to be mainly spiritual, becoming absorbed in the 'serving of tables,' but that is not our concern at present; let it suffice that the example of Christ warrants us in believing that we are intended to beautify and refresh and cheer the lives of others in this present world, not only to prepare them for the next.

Thus many indications point towards co-operation, and both parties would gain by it in different ways. The religiously-minded would gain fresh insight into the application of their deepest principles to practical problems: while the scientifically-minded would gain in an increased reverence for facts connected with so surpassingly wonderful a thing as the propagation of human life, owing to a surer grasp of their own lofty principle, which I think we cannot be wrong in tracing directly to the influence of Christianity.

But if the co-operation is to be completely harmonious, and as effective in action as it might be, there is a very interesting corollary to be drawn from what has been said. It is briefly this:

In so far as we believe our fundamental principle to be true, we shall plant it in young minds for its own sake, not primarily because its outcome will be beneficial to humanity.

The importance of this corollary is so vital that I must devote a paragraph or two to explaining its drift. The deeper a principle is the more potent it is for good in solving practical problems : but it can only be applied promptly and with insight by those who have learnt to know it *as a living truth* by their experience since they were children. Now this knowledge only grows if the principle is given to the child as something sublime and self-evident, and needing no commendation from the requirements of practical life familiar to adults but outside the child's horizon. It is astonishing how often this canon is ignored. The child has a natural affinity for a mystery, but it must be presented in a form that appeals to his personal affections. Now take the ground principle of eugenists, the value of human life. Remember there are some people in England whom we classified as in group 1, who have a strong sense of that value. There is a vast number who have it not. How is this? Why is class 2 so large? The answer is fairly clear. It consists of people who in their childhood did not imbibe the principle as a principle to which an easy and decisive primacy of position belonged for its own sake, but either they heard nothing about it at all, or it came to them later *as something subordinate to a certain practical need* : the need of keeping the Empire going or buttressing up our commercial position against powerful competitors. But we cannot plant a principle which is to be the foundation of a policy by merely insisting that the policy without the principle cannot last. The principle must be self-evident and need no argument, or else it must be a corollary of some deeper one which commends itself to any healthy young mind.

Here we can clearly see the immense advantage which the teacher enjoys when he finds that he has to do with a child in whom there has been firmly and effectively planted the idea of the Fatherhood of a Personal God. He can then presuppose in the child a readiness to see the preciousness of human life, and to shape his own conduct in conformity with that doctrine. I could say a great deal to show the appalling difficulty of planting that doctrine in any child's mind so that it will live and grow and bear abundant fruit, unless his view of life is already dominated and quickened by embryonic personal religion ; but that is not my concern just now : I want here to appeal to those

who on the whole agree with this statement and admit the necessary priority of religion, to take a further step and realise the plain need of the religion being taught, not because it will save England—though it will—not because it might make this world a paradise—though it might—but because it is what it is, the response of the human heart to a divine appeal. As soon as we see plainly that there is truth in that definition of religion, there ought to be no hesitation whatever in agreeing that religion must not be pressed on people because of its good effects on earth; for that is an attempt to base something divine on something human.

This is the mistake, for instance, of those who advocate the teaching of religion as a cure for the declining birth rate; the feebleness of the appeal being apparent as soon as an objector answers 'You assume that a declining birth rate is an evil: I doubt your assumption.' If, on the other hand, a eugenist or biologist tells me that he sees no evidence of there having been at any time a divine appeal to mankind, then what I am now saying has, of course, no message for him. I am not saying he is wrong, but that, if he wants the next generation to be eugenically minded, he must cast about for some way of making the doctrine of the value of human life a firm foundation for that which has to be built upon it—viz. eugenics, and perhaps he may agree with a lady who, though far from being ecclesiastically disposed, lately said that the only way of making head against our social disorders would be for the Government to subsidise every single religious denomination, that the principles of religion might be taught to the children by those who accept them. In a somewhat similar spirit Japanese inquirers come wandering over to Europe in quest of a set of religious principles which will play the part in their national training of Shintoism and revive or sustain the Bushido. But observe the cart before the horse; the clamouring for the fruit before the seed is sown. If you set about hunting for a religion in order to secure military efficiency you are in danger of losing both.

But it is easy to misunderstand. This paper is not a plea for the truth of Christianity but an attempt to show the relation to each other of scientific faith and religious faith: and the possibility of their working together in perfect concord and with mutual respect in a movement concerned with the highest of all earthly aspirations, the bettering of the average standard of human life; the raising of the highest thing we know of in the

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created universe. I am afraid the reader is hoping for something more practical than I have yet attempted to say; but there is one remark to be made before the practical suggestion with which I will bring this inquiry to a close.

While we recognise the caution that is necessary in the view we take of religion as a social force, let us not be blind to the plain teaching of facts. It may be, and I feel sure it is, a mistake to try to make our children religious merely because, if we succeed, our own environments and theirs will be healthier and happier; but yet what a wonderful support it ought to be to our faith to see as clearly as most eugenists do, that the trustful surrender of ourselves to the highest mystery of which we can form any conception is the one hope for humanity, because, as soon as we begin to try to do this, there dawns upon the mind a new hope; and the outcome of that hope is the charity about which there is no disagreement. It is only another word for the eugenist's estimate of the value of human life, and for many centuries the deepest minds have recognised that the chronological order of the birth of new ideas is faith, hope, and charity: not charity, hope, and faith; and yet that the greatest stimulus to faith and the longing for it is the perception of the royal beauty of the hope and charity which spring from it with rapid growth and vital vigour. For instance, to-day, when we are appalled by the complexity and range of our social disorders, the woeful piteousness of the wreckage and havoc in young lives all around us, yet after all this very desolation is, and always has been, the most powerful of all possible teachers of truth. If faith in an unseen principle is the beginning of all healing, then at least let us understand that our troubles are an evidence of truth: they are forcing English people to do what they loathe—that is, think: they are gradually training us to the grandest of all practical perceptions—namely, that if disloyalty to a common faith has been the real cause of so gigantic mischief, then the return to our faith must be fraught with an almost infinite hope. If the ignoring of a principle can work so potently, how vast must be the power of obedience to it. 'Turn ye to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope.'

But this change cannot take place in a day; and while we are conferring together time flies. If what I conceive to be possible comes to pass, there will be a saving revival of home-life in England, and of home training; but meantime we have to deal with innumerable young lives which have been in this

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respect stunted and starved. What is to be done with the thousands of children who have never learnt what love, obedience, and law mean from their life at home? There is no doubt about the answer. Maimed and marred though our efforts may be, we cannot be wrong in trying to play the part of foster-parents; and huge though the sum total of our failures may very likely be, we must not doubt that every worker who tries to quicken the lives of young people by inspiring them with the touch of love is doing his utmost to spread a great truth. I mean that ultimately everything depends on our community listening again, with feelings of awe and wonder, to Nature's still, small voice. She tells us in tones now of menace and heartrending appeal, now of the gentlest persuasion, that truths planted in the earliest years of life are the truths that live and bear fruit, and that the planter is the parent, whose responsibility cannot be given to another without loss. It may be, in short, the truest eugenics to revive in every class of society the meaning of home, as the place where the seeds of physical, moral, and spiritual life are sown.

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